

SETTING AND STRUCTURE IN TWO ROMAN WALL DECORATIONS OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

WILLIAM TRONZO

My aim in the following paper is to offer some observations on two works of early medieval wall decoration in Rome that have survived, like most other wall painting and mosaic of the period, in a diminished and much altered state. One of them is now a mere handful of fragments, a few pieces of mosaic that were detached from the walls of Old St. Peter's in the early seventeenth century and dispersed throughout Rome and elsewhere; fortunately, these fragments are also known, and a little more fully, in various drawings and descriptions made prior to the destruction of the church. The other decoration, though much damaged too, is still in the lower basilica of S. Clemente and in situ. Yet these works are also unusual in at least one important respect, namely, in the degree to which they reveal the form of the original ensemble from which they derived. It is one of the unfortunate facts of the field that early medieval wall decoration is often synonymous with poor condition. Thus it is difficult to comprehend how a given decoration might have functioned as a whole and, without this context, difficult in turn to grasp the full significance of any given part. In the present case studies, however, the problem of condition can be at least partly overcome: the fragments under examination here bear valuable traces of their original setting and structure, which sheds some light on the meaning of the decorations and the larger artistic developments to which they belong.

Let us begin, then, with the more complicated, though chronologically later problem of the two, a decoration from the time of Pope Leo IV (847–

855) in the lower church of S. Clemente (Fig. 1), perhaps most famous for the scene of the Ascension of Christ (also wrongly identified as the Assumption of the Virgin), with its mysterious centerpiece of an oval-shaped stone.¹ A debate over the meaning of the representation and the purpose of the stone, in fact, has dominated the discussion of this decoration, without, however, taking into account very fully the problem of the original extent and nature of the work. It is this problem specifically with which I shall be concerned here. Much of the following discussion will involve reconstructing the architectural setting of the decoration which was, according to all indications, once in place. I should say at the outset, however, that an archeological investigation of this area of the church was not possible, even though such an investigation might have been very helpful. Wall and pier here both show signs of repeated restoration which has rendered certain features, such as the holes in the lower inside corner of the pier upon which part of the decoration is situated, difficult to interpret.² Nonetheless, from a close observation of the work itself, there still emerges the picture of a single and very interesting pattern of use.

The decoration, briefly described,³ consists of a group of christological scenes, at least originally

¹ See John Osborne, *Early Mediaeval Wall-Paintings in the Lower Church of San Clemente, Rome* (New York, 1984), 24 ff, for the most extensive recent discussion of the painting and for earlier bibliography. The main points of the debate over the meaning of the scene and the stone are summarized by Osborne, 43 ff.

² In addition to the watercolor drawings made soon after the discovery of the paintings and published by Joseph Mullooly, *Saint Clement, Pope and Martyr and His Basilica in Rome* (Rome, 1869 and 1873), Parker photographs 28121–3 F (Fototeca Unione at the American Academy in Rome) have proven helpful in understanding the restoration of the wall.

³ Osborne, 43 ff, gives a more detailed accounting of the paintings and their measurements.

I was fortunate in being able to discuss some of the archeological problems of S. Clemente with Federico Guidobaldi, who generously shared with me his knowledge of the lower church. I would also like to thank Caecilia Davis-Weyer, Karin Einaudi, Gail Feigenbaum, Jack Freiberg, Irving Lavin, and Charles Wolf for their comments and criticism.

six, of which only four (besides the Ascension) are known. These scenes are dated to the time of Pope Leo IV, who is also shown to the left of the Ascension as a pendant to the figure of St. Vitus on the right. And they are located in the southeast corner of the nave of the lower church, partly on a wall that was built to fill in the first intercolumniation from the right of the original entrance colonnade (facing the entrance and the narthex of the church), and partly on the L-shaped pier that forms the southeast corner of the nave (and the northeast corner of the south aisle).⁴

The largest of the group is the Ascension, which occupies the full width of the fill wall and almost two-thirds of its entire height from column to pier. The scene is roughly divided into three registers; the uppermost shows the enthroned Christ, the middle, the standing Virgin, and the lower, the Apostles (with Pope Leo and St. Vitus) grouped to either side of the oval-shaped stone. To the left of the Ascension there is no trace of decoration, nor is one to be expected, at least from the period of the paintings under consideration here. At the time the paintings were made, this, the second intercolumniation of the entrance colonnade from the right (again facing the entrance), was still open.⁵ To the right, on the wall and the three faces of the corner pier, on the other hand, are visible, or partly visible, five scenes and one figure. These include the Crucifixion (to the right of the Ascension in the upper portion of the wall) and, below it, an unidentified scene whose only recognizable feature is part of a building in the upper left corner of the panel. Three scenes then follow on the adjacent face of the pier, stacked in a row from top to bottom: the Women at the Tomb, the Harrowing of Hell, and the Wedding at Cana.⁶ Finally, on

the upper part of the front of the pier facing the now walled-in south colonnade of the nave are the remains of a (standing?) figure with a nimbus once identified by an inscription as St. Prosperius. This figure constitutes the furthestmost element to the right of the ensemble: the wall decoration that continues on the other side of the pier and into the south aisle belongs to a different period and context altogether.⁷ However, there are also fragments of a socle consisting of decorative panels of fictive marble revetment and hanging drapery on the lower wall beneath all of the scenes. There are various, quite striking areas of loss throughout.

The decoration thus delimited is generally described in the literature simply as a group of narrative christological scenes,⁸ although what is perhaps most impressive about it is the degree to which it differs from other narratives, particularly in its asymmetrical arrangement and in its seemingly unusual selection of subjects. Given this fact, as well as the general condition of the lower church of S. Clemente, with its bits of wall painting from different periods scattered throughout, one wonders whether the decoration here might have extended beyond the area just described or belonged to a larger program that is perhaps now preserved, if at all, only in a fragment in some other part of the church.

Part of the answer to these questions lies in what has survived. None of the other paintings in the lower church of S. Clemente has ever been connected to the ensemble of the Ascension in subject or style, and none is believed to be exactly contemporary in date.⁹ Furthermore, not only does the column to the left of the Ascension make a firm border for the ensemble, but the figure of St. Prosperius, on the right, also forms a kind of frame, engaging the viewer and stilling the narrative movement that is implicit in the choice and arrangement of the other scenes. To the right of this figure, moreover, the decoration stops in a sharp and even break beyond which no further trace of the same plaster is found, suggesting an original and intentional right edge to the ensemble. As to height, on the other hand, it is conceivable that the paintings did not go much beyond the upper borders of the upper scenes that are now visible (Crucifixion, Women at the Tomb, St. Prosperius). These borders, after all, align horizontally, and fall

⁴On the architectural history of the lower church of S. Clemente, see Richard Krautheimer, *Corpus basilicarum christianarum Romae* (Vatican City-Rome-New York, 1937-77), I, 118 ff; M. Cecchelli Trinci, "Osservazioni sulla basilica di S. Clemente in Roma," *RACr* 50 (1974), 93 ff; Federico Guidobaldi, "Il complesso archeologico di S. Clemente," in *San Clemente Miscellany*, II, ed. Luke Dempsey (Rome, 1978), 215 ff (edited and republished as a separate volume in Rome in the same year).

⁵Krautheimer, 131. There is a long, narrow, rectangular indentation in the masonry now filling the second intercolumniation directly to the left of the column framing the Ascension scene on the left, from which some object has been removed. It is possible that this object was in place before the second intercolumniation was filled in (though precisely when, it cannot be determined), and that it may have functioned in some way in the context of the ensemble reconstructed here.

⁶The latter scene is identified largely on the basis of an inscription ("Architriclinus") of which no trace remains today; see Osborne, 67 ff.

⁷*Ibid.*, 145 ff, for the decoration of the south aisle of the lower church.

⁸As, for example, *ibid.*, 24 ff.

⁹*Ibid.*, esp. 72 ff.

approximately on level with the tops of the columns of the entrance colonnade. Given these considerations, it is thus likely that the ensemble of the Ascension of Christ and the other scenes was never intended to cover more than the area it does today, that is, the walled-in intercolumniation and the three faces of the corner pier of the nave of the church.

The conclusion is corroborated, and our view of the situation broadened, when we add to our picture an analysis of what has not survived or, perhaps more accurately, of the very condition of the painting surface itself and its pattern of survival and loss. For it would appear that this pattern was not simply a random one and an aggregate of the years, but largely the result of a particular and limited campaign. The important features, in my opinion, are these (Fig. 2): the squarish area (A) devoid of any painting or plaster in the socle zone of the wall directly beneath the scene of the Ascension and the problematic oval-shaped stone (B); the narrow slots (C), one on either side of this empty square, that are now filled in with cement, but which, to judge from early photographs and drawings, cut deeply into the masonry and continued as shallower and narrower notches (D) onto the long, narrow marble slab that forms a kind of baseboard at the bottom of the wall;¹⁰ the tract of masonry (E) above the Ascension; and the odd configuration of the painted border (F) at the right corner of the Ascension, where, near the far right edge of the fill wall, the background color of the Ascension seems to break through the frame of the panel and go up above the scene (Fig. 3).¹¹

What these features signify I take as follows (Fig. 4). The empty squarish area (A) in the middle of the socle beneath the Ascension must once have been covered, for it was never plastered or painted, and, considering its shape, the most logical explanation is an altar, as Cecchelli, Lieball, and Osborne have suggested.¹² This altar, in turn, must

¹⁰ Parker photograph 28121-2 F; Mullooly (1873), pl. opp. p. 280.

¹¹ This area of the border must have been what Osborne had in mind when he described the panel of the Ascension as "somewhat irregular"; Osborne, 25.

¹² Carlo Cecchelli, *San Clemente* (Rome, n.d.), 146; Joseph Lieball, *Die leoninischen Fresken in der Unterkirche von S. Clemente in Rom. Eine ikonographische Studien* (Vienna, n.d.), 27; Osborne, 29. Of the altar types isolated by Braun as possible at this time, the table type ("Tischaltar") would seem excluded because it was open underneath, and thus would not have hidden the center area of the lower wall which, after all, was left unpainted. Nor is any type with a masonry base likely, given the fact that no trace of such a base has been found. See Josef Braun, *Der christliche Altar*, I (Munich, 1924), 125 ff.

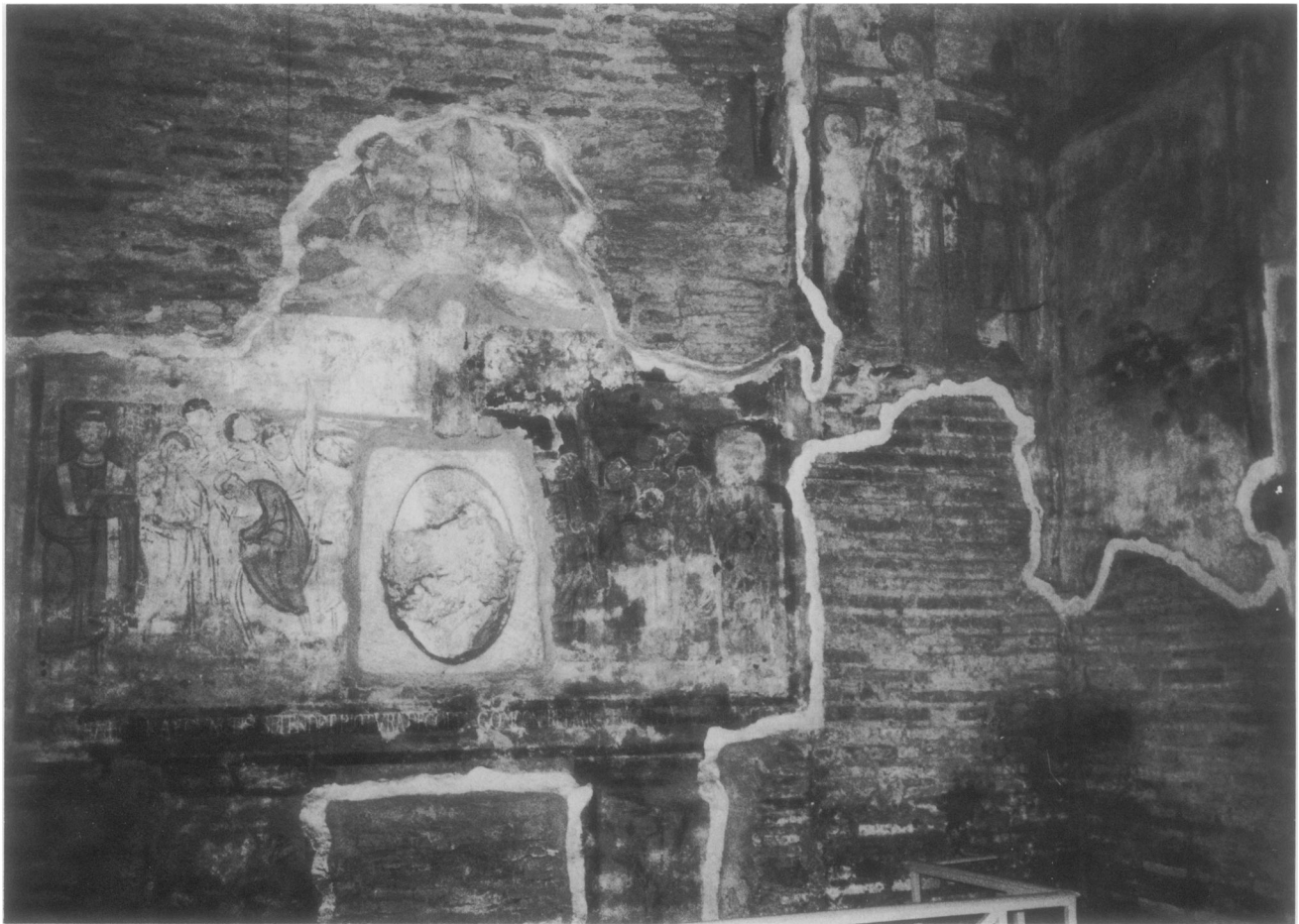
once have been flanked by low screening walls in the form of parapet slabs which were inserted deep into the fill wall, as Lieball also observed, where the two narrow slots (C) occur.¹³ These slots give us the height of the parapet slabs—ca. 90 cm—which is approximately the height of the altar (82–88 cm), measured from the bottom of the slots. But they also give a bit of information of a different sort. The narrow slots into which the parapet slabs were probably inserted align with even narrower notches (D) cut into the long thin block of marble (perhaps a column sliced in half lengthwise) that forms part of the baseboard of the fill wall. These notches would appear to represent the profile of a raised strip that the parapet slabs had in the center of their bottom edge. This strip most likely was a flange designed to be inserted into a groove on the floor in order to help hold the slabs in place. The hypothesis that the baseboard of the wall to the level of the marble slab containing the grooves was once hidden by pavement is also supported by the fact that it was never treated with plaster or paint. On the other hand, the plaster on the front face of the pier (with the figure of St. Prosperius) now extends approximately 8 cm below the level of the top edge of the notches in this baseboard (and originally it may have gone even lower). And at the time the paintings were made in the mid-ninth century the floor of the basilica was much lower still—though whether it was 20–30 cm (according to Krautheimer's figures) or 40–50 cm (Cecchelli Trinci) lower than the notches cannot now be resolved.¹⁴ Therefore, a platform that brought the level of the floor up to the height of the notches (and that itself was probably over 20 cm in height but under 50 cm) may be reconstructed to support the wall and the altar that it enclosed. But the platform was probably not one that extended over the entire corner, or at least not one that embraced the front face of the pier.¹⁵ It is likely, in fact, that this platform did not cover the area much beyond the parapet walls themselves, or the forwardmost point of the corner pier—a space approximately 200 cm wide and 90 cm deep.

Concerning the upper reaches of the ensemble the situation is a little more complex. What seems certain is that the area (E) above the Ascension scene was once covered by an arch which, like the

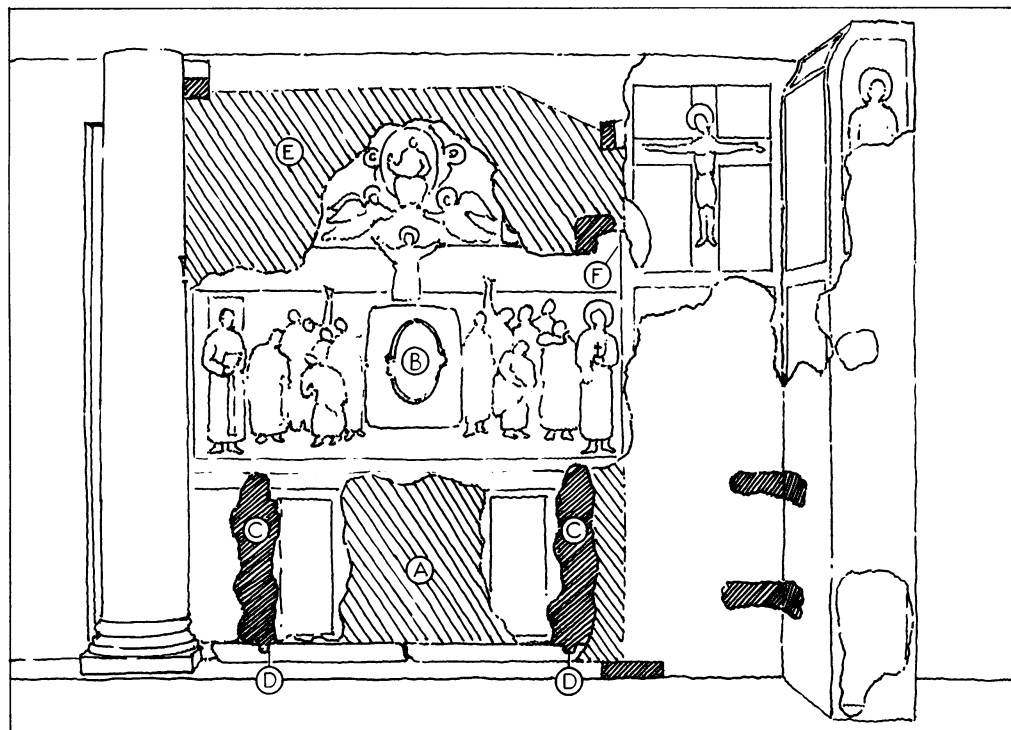
¹³ Lieball, 27.

¹⁴ Krautheimer, 127. Cecchelli Trinci, 115 ff.

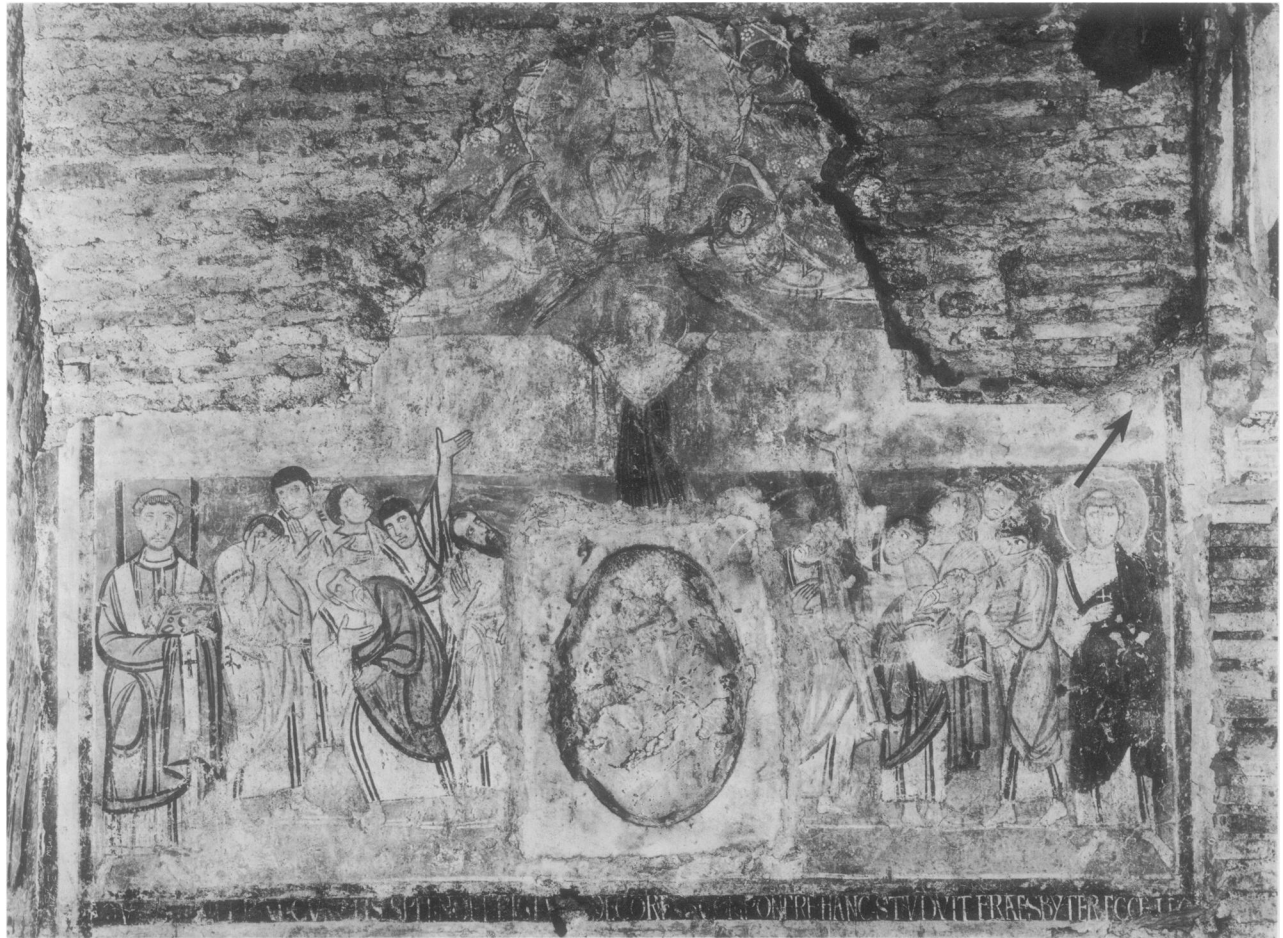
¹⁵ None of the floor surface in the immediate area of the paintings appears to be original, nor does it bear any trace of the platform posited here.



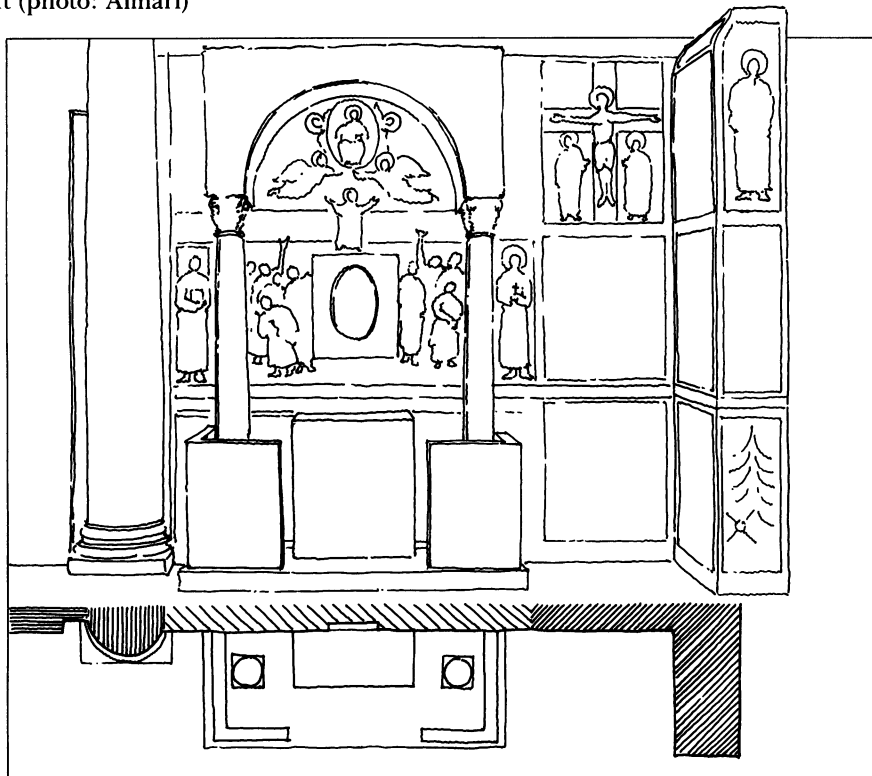
1. S. Clemente, Lower Church, view of wall paintings in southeast corner of nave



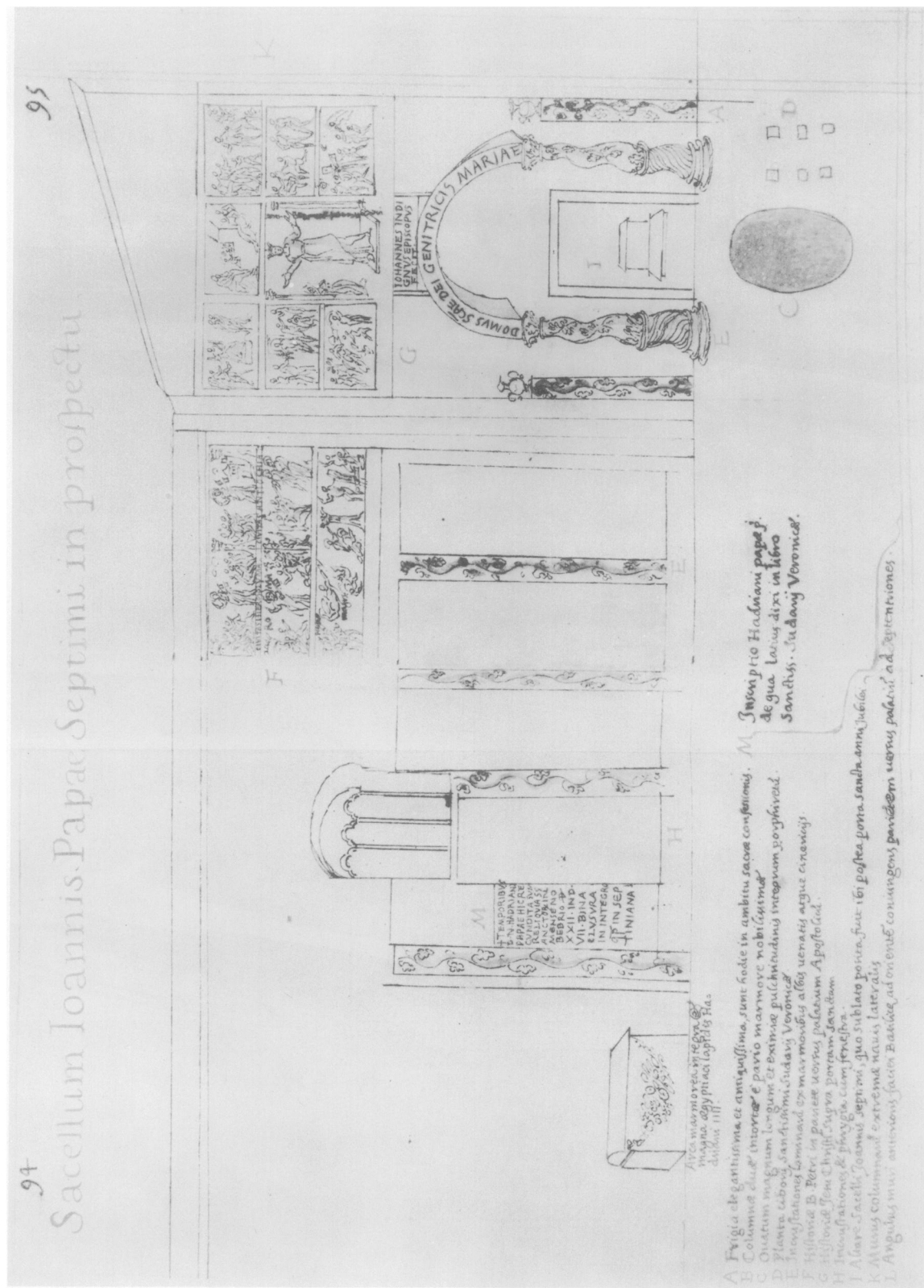
2. S. Clemente, Lower Church, schematic diagram of condition of wall in southeast corner of nave (drawing: Charles Wolf)



3. Detail of Figure 1 showing background color of Ascension scene (at arrow) above horizontal border to left (photo: Alinari)



4. S. Clemente, Lower Church, reconstruction of altar ensemble in southeast corner of nave (drawing: Charles Wolf)



5. Giacomo Grimaldi, view of northeast corner of Old St. Peter's and Oratory of Pope John VII, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, Cod. barb. lat. 2733, fols. 94v-95r (after Grimaldi, *Descrizione*, ed. Niggl, fig. 42)



7. Giacomo Grimaldi, scenes of Peter and Paul at eastern end of northern wall of nave, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, Cod. barb. lat. 2733, fol. 89r (after Grimaldi, *Descrizione*, ed. Niggli, fig. 38)



8. Sinai, St. Catherine's monastery, icon with scenes of life of St. George (after Weitzmann, *Icon*, pl. 34)

altar below, was an actual architectural form that rested against the wall. For what else would account for the presence of the bare brick surface (E) above the Ascension in the exact form of an arch or, conversely, the precise survival of the Ascension scene with its center portion in a neat and unbroken half-circle shape? If the entire wall above the Ascension had been plastered, chances are that some of the plaster would have adhered to the surface of the brick; but none, except in the small area containing the bit of problematic border (F) at the far right edge, has survived. Put another way, if the plaster had continued above the Ascension, it seems improbable that the edge of the loss would have followed so closely the upper border of the scene. On the other hand, why would the upper right border of the Ascension (F) have stopped short of the right edge of the wall, and the blue background color of the scene have continued above it for a few centimeters in what seems to have been a thin strip (17 cm wide), unless it served to frame some now missing element.¹⁶ A similar strip on the left, unfortunately, does not now exist, but it is indicated in the watercolor copy made shortly after the discovery of the painting.¹⁷ The element that once must have covered the bare brick surface up to the edge of these strips—the remains of what I believe to have been painted frames—must also have reflected the basic shape that is now visible on the wall, that is, of an arch with a rectangular outer perimeter.

Yet what was this arch made of? It is possible that it was formed of stucco, but unlikely for the same reason that plaster is unlikely as the original covering of the brick surface—because some of the stucco probably would have adhered to the brick, and none is evidenced. Nor is wood a likely possibility because, to judge from our sources, structures of this material were extremely rare in the churches of Rome. Only one mention of a ciborium in wood is known to me in the *Liber Pontificalis*, for instance, which otherwise contains dozens of references to ciboria in marble.¹⁸ What seems more

likely, however, is marble itself, but this material raises a critical problem of support. How would such a heavy form as a marble arch have been supported at this point on the wall? Except for one rather large hole to the left of the wall above the figure of St. Vitus and two much smaller holes at the top of the wall to the left and right, there is nothing that could be construed as the trace of a system of supports for the arch in the wall itself (and the holes that are now visible would not have been sufficient to hold brackets that would have carried the entire weight of the form).¹⁹

It is necessary, therefore, to imagine some sort of support from below, probably in the form of columns. In this case, given the relatively restricted space of the area as a whole, a large arch supported by four columns is much less likely than a shallower arch supported by two columns. These columns probably stood directly on the altar platform which was enveloped by the low parapet wall, as appears to have been so often the arrangement, for instance, in Old St. Peter's, whose numerous medieval altars are at least partly known through the ground plan of Tiberius Alpharanus.²⁰ And this placement is corroborated by the painted frames of the Ascension scene above. As we have already seen, the presence of the strip of blue background color on the right suggests that the arch itself did not reach to the very edge of the fill wall, but fell short of it by about 17 cm or the width of the blue strip. If it were also the case that the arch was supported by columns, which now seems likely, then the column on the right too must have been located at least 17 cm from the same edge, and probably a great deal more—or well within the enclosure created by the parapet whose location is certain because of the slot in the wall (C). It is interesting to note that this slot also occurs 17 cm from the right edge of the fill wall. For the sake of symmetry, a similar configuration may be imagined on the left, although the damaged state of the painting in the area of the upper frame does not

¹⁶An elaborate decoration above the Ascension as suggested by Lieball is precluded by an arch in the position argued here; see Lieball, 28.

¹⁷See Mullooly (1869), pl. opp. p. 189, or Mullooly (1873), pl. opp. p. 280, where a few centimeters of the background color of the Ascension are visible on the upper left reaching above the rectangular frame of the scene.

¹⁸*Liber Pontificalis*, ed. Louis Duchesne, I (Paris, 1955), 375, concerning Sergius I (687–701): “Hic cyburium basilice sancte Susannae, quod ante lignum fuerat, ex marmore fecit.” See also below, note 25.

¹⁹The character of the brickwork in the fill wall changes abruptly at a point about half a meter below the edge of the modern vaults that were put in to support the upper church, and precisely at the point where the two smaller holes mentioned in the text are located (as indicated in Fig. 2). According to Federico Guidobaldi, this upper strip of masonry and indeed the two holes that are partly sunk into it may well have been of modern manufacture, and possibly contemporary in date with the modern vaults.

²⁰Tiberius Alpharanus, *De basilicae vaticanae antiquissima et nova structura*, ed. Michele Cerrati (Rome, 1914); see especially no. 114, the oratory of John VII, which is also discussed in the present study.

permit us to calculate the location of all of the elements with precision. The entire structure also could have been quite shallow: estimating the columns carrying the arch to be approximately 180 cm high and thus 20–24 cm in diameter, the block containing the arch, then, might well have been ca. 45–50 cm thick (with dimensions of ca. 180 × 75 cm for the outer perimeter, and a radius for the arch opening of ca. 60 cm), and the columns, roughly 20 cm from the wall. Considering the shape of the arch, with its rectangular outer form, one might also easily imagine it as carved from a single block of stone, which would have made support by only two columns likely.²¹ It is thus possible that the entire structure of arch and columns could have stood without the support of the wall, although it may have been tied to it in some way that utilized the holes now visible that were noted earlier.

It might be objected that the columns carrying the arch would have at least partly blocked the lower half of the Ascension scene. But would they have interfered with the viewing of the scene, or helped to frame it in a particular and meaningful way? Positioned to either side of the arch, the columns would have created out of the painting a kind of triptych, separating the two standing figures at the sides, of pope and saint (which would have been fully visible when viewed from the front), from the central composition of the sacred narrative scene. All of the key elements of this scene, likewise, would have been fully visible when viewed from the front: the ascending Christ, the orant Virgin, and the wildly gesticulating apostles flanking the oval stone. Such a practice of framing a composition painted or sculpted on the wall with columns, though admittedly not common in the Middle Ages, is not otherwise unknown: witness the mid-fifth century decoration of the Orthodox Baptistry in Ravenna, and that of the late thirteenth century in the upper church of S. Francesco in Assisi.²² In S. Clemente, furthermore, it could be said that a trace of this format is still visible in the painting itself, in the levels of the different parts which are clearly distinguished from one another. Pope and saint stand on a much lower groundline than the apostles in the center of the composition.

²¹ See below, note 30.

²² F. W. Deichmann, *Frühchristliche Bauten und Mosaiken von Ravenna* (Baden-Baden, 1958), pls. 72 ff. Hans Belting, *Die Oberkirche von San Francesco in Assisi* (Berlin, 1977), 107 ff, pls. 18, 24, 31.

And when seen within a larger context, the architectural form thus defined—an arch supported by a pair of columns that flank an altar enclosed by a low parapet screen—was hardly unusual in early medieval Rome. This architecture was a ciborium, a form that served an honorific and religious function, rooted in the ancient imperial past and widely diffused in the early Middle Ages, in covering an altar and denoting a special place.²³ Ciboria, of course, were commonplace for both main and side altars, to judge from the surviving evidence and the literary sources such as the *Liber Pontificalis*.²⁴ As a matter of fact, the eighth and ninth centuries witnessed a veritable deluge of papal ciborium giving to churches in Rome, to which Leo IV himself made a prominent contribution.²⁵ These also, though more rarely, included ciboria of the two- (as opposed to four-) column type.²⁶ Among known examples, there is one that comes particularly close to the form reconstructed here—the ciborium in the oratory of John VII (705–707) in Old St. Peter's, which will be examined in the second part of this paper. Presumably like S. Clemente, this ciborium was also a relatively shallow form consisting of two columns that carried an arch above an altar, the major difference being that the arch was not enclosed within a rectangular perimeter. But the rectangular shape was otherwise quite common for ciboria of the four-column type, which were made mostly of marble, of which the example of S. Clemente may be thought to be a variation.²⁷

It is likely, therefore, that the half-ciborium of S. Clemente was also made of marble, which would explain why none of the elements we have reconstructed was found in place when the church was

²³ On the meaning of the ciborium, see E. Baldwin Smith, *Architectural Symbolism of Imperial Rome and the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1956; rpr. New York, 1978), 107 ff, 197 ff. *RAC* 2, 68 ff (s.v. Ciborium).

²⁴ Braun, II, 185 ff, although in his discussion of the half-ciborium, the author fails to take note of the example in the oratory of John VII (discussed in the second part of this paper). See also Molly Teasdale Smith, "The Development of the Altar Canopy in Rome," *RACr* 50 (1974), 379 ff; L. Pani Ermini, "Note sulla decorazione dei cibori a Roma nell'alto medioevo," *BA* 59 (1974), 115 ff.

²⁵ According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Leo's contributions included gifts to the churches of Old St. Peter's and St. Paul's (II, 121, 130; see also II, 113, 119). Nearly three dozen ciboria were given or renovated by the popes of the 8th and 9th centuries.

²⁶ What seems to be the ground plan of a two-column or half-ciborium appears on Tiberius Alphanus' plan of Old St. Peter's at no. 51, the altar of St. Martialis, consecrated in the early 11th century, not to mention no. 114, the oratory of John VII; Tiberius Alphanus, 68 f, 106 f.

²⁷ For example, see the monuments collected by Pani Ermini, *passim*.

excavated in the mid-nineteenth century. In the early twelfth century the lower church of S. Clemente was partly demolished and filled in with rubble to serve as a foundation for the new upper structure, or the church now in use.²⁸ At that time, however, the lower church was also stripped of the valuables that could be moved, including small architectural elements, and probably even the object once set in the problematic oval stone of the Ascension scene, as certain of the pry-marks at the edge of the oval indicate.²⁹ The various pieces of the ensemble that we have reconstructed—altar, arch, columns, and parapet slabs—would have been most appropriate prey for this activity, if they were of relatively small size and in marble, as one might suppose. The only problem is that none of these pieces has been located elsewhere in the church, which is something of a mystery.³⁰ But neither have the original contents of the problematic oval stone, and these we are certain were once on the wall.

With the ciborium and altar in place, the rationale of the ensemble becomes a little clearer. For, in broadest terms, what we have reconstructed here is a chapel, a separately functioning liturgical area of the church, with its own altar and architectural form, which wall decoration clearly served in two important ways.³¹ The scene of the Ascension of Christ, on the one hand, would have functioned as a focal point of the chapel, calling to mind the

decoration of the apse of a church, not only because it was set into the curved field of the arch of the ciborium like an apse decoration in its conch, but also because it belonged to a tradition of use over an altar—witness, notably, the examples from the monasteries of Egypt.³² And one might claim this tradition to provide the proper frame for an elucidation of the meaning of the scene in this context—an image quintessentially expressive of the divinity of Christ and of the foundation of the church, pervaded with hints of Christ's return at the end of time, and thus particularly appropriate for the embellishment of a liturgical realm. Slightly more problematic, on the other hand, are the smaller scenes from the life of Christ to the right of the Ascension. These are now fragmentary and, as regards their selection, difficult to fathom. However, they may well have recalled the nave of a church, like that of S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, with their narrative that embraced, albeit selectively, Christ's ministry (Cana) and his passion (all of the rest), and thus may be elucidated in the terms— theological, liturgical, historical—of such decorations of the nave.³³ It could be said, therefore, that this wall decoration, far from being a mere gathering of narrative subjects, was a carefully contrived and differentiated entity that drew upon larger conventions in order to define within this specific church a definite, if subsidiary, liturgical place.

The center of this place, then, must have been what was once covered by the ciborium, that is, the altar, but even more so, the oval-shaped stone, whose significance may stand out now also a little more clearly. On the one hand, it is quite unlikely that the original contents and appearance of the stone will ever be known—obviously, the object itself was never meant to be seen. It merely served as the setting or receptacle for another object altogether, which has long been lost. Yet there is every indication that this stone was planned and in place from the very beginning of the ensemble,

²⁸ Krautheimer, 122.

²⁹ These marks have also been interpreted—though unconvincingly—as the traces of hinges that held a door over the oval opening in the stone; see Eileen Kane, "The Painted Decoration of the Church of San Clemente," in *San Clemente Miscellany*, II, 63. Some of the marks must have been made before the object once set in the stone was removed since they are partly covered with the cement that probably served to hold the object in place. On the despoliation of the lower church, see Francesco Gandolfo, "Rimpiego di sculture antiche nei troni papali del XII secolo," *RendPontAcc*, ser. 3, 47 (1974–75), 207 ff; Guidobaldi, 290 ff; Kane, 99 ff; Joan Barclay Lloyd, *The Architecture of the Medieval Church and Conventual Buildings of S. Clemente in Rome ca. 1080–1300*, diss. (University of London, 1980), 125; Osborne, 52.

³⁰ The fragment of an arch with a rectangular outer perimeter, apparently much like the one reconstructed here, although slightly smaller (with a radius for the arch opening of 50 cm), is now embedded in a staircase in the monastery of S. Clemente. According to Federico Guidobaldi, to whom I owe this information, the arch probably comes from the lower church and dates to the 9th century.

³¹ The reconstruction propounded here calls to mind the passage in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (5.20) which describes Acca's habit of collecting relics and placing them on altars in his church: "Dedit namque operam, quod et hodie facit, ut acquisitis undecumque reliquiis beatorum apostolorum et martyrum Christi, in venerationem illorum poneret altaria, distinctis portibus in hoc ipsum intra muros ejusdem ecclesiae."

³² Christa Belting-Ihm, *Die Programme der christlichen Apsismalerei vom vierten Jahrhundert bis zur Mitte des achten Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden, 1960), 95 ff. Otto Nussbaum, *Der Standort des Liturgien am christlichen Altar vor dem Jahre 1000* (Bonn, 1965), 110 ff.

³³ F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna. Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes*, I (Wiesbaden, 1969), 171 ff; *ibid.*, II, 1 (1974), 154 ff, with a discussion of the interpretations put forth to explain the christological scenes of the nave. There is no general treatment of nave decoration; however, see Otto Demus, *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily* (London, 1950), 200 ff; W. Tronzo, "The Prestige of St. Peter's: Observations on the Function of Monumental Narrative Cycles in Italy," *Studies in the History of Art of the National Gallery of Art* 16 (1985), 93 ff.

and little doubt that it served as a sepulcrum or setting for a relic, as Garrucci, Matthiae, and others have argued.³⁴ As such, it falls into a long line of wall sepulcra or niches that may be interpreted as sepulcra above altars, including examples in the so-called Tempietto sul Clitunno near Spoleto, S. Saba and S. Urbano alla Caffarella in Rome, and S. Pietro and S. Maria Maggiore in Tuscania.³⁵ And although none of these, unfortunately, gives us a clue as to the type of relic the stone in S. Clemente may have contained, it is interesting to note that in at least one other case, that of S. Pietro in Tuscania, the niche in the apse was also combined with an Ascension scene.³⁶

Nonetheless, it is in precisely this context, that is, in the context of what must have been a relatively common practice in the early Middle Ages, of the placing of a wall sepulcrum in an apse or niche above an altar, that the character of the ensemble in S. Clemente can be more fully appreciated.³⁷ For although the outer form of none of these niches or sepulcra is entirely known, nowhere else, it would seem, was the visual aspect of the relic so exploited as at S. Clemente. Nowhere else was the relic so closely associated with the altar, so integrated into its pictorial setting, or so much the true centerpiece of the entire composition of the ensemble, which is arrayed around it as if in a frame, as in this chapel of the lower church. The point of all of this, of course, can now only be dimly sensed, yet one suspects that it represents the achievement of the ensemble: to bring the sacred object into the full frontal gaze of the viewer as if it were an icon and thereby make reference,

if only as an allusion, to the close relationship between the cults of images and relics.

Our reconstruction of the chapel in S. Clemente might prompt another look at related early medieval wall decorations, one of which, the oratory of John VII in Old St. Peter's, I would like to consider in conclusion (Fig. 5). This case will be briefer, however, chiefly because it will involve not adding but taking away. Of the actual decoration, of course, only a handful of fragments remains—a few bits of mosaic that were detached from the wall when the eastern portion of the basilica was finally pulled down by Pope Paul V. Yet, for our purposes, the various drawings and descriptions of Old St. Peter's made by Jacopo Grimaldi in the early seventeenth century will serve as well or better, since they give a picture of the whole and, though different from one another in certain details, are generally considered accurate renderings of the actual situation the draftsman encountered in the church.³⁸ In any case, they agree in all of the features we shall discuss.

It has been the assumption of scholars from the time of Grimaldi on—without exception, I believe—that the oratory of John VII extended over two walls of the northeast corner of the basilica of Old St. Peter's and embraced two different groups of scenes: one of the life of Christ in the far north bay of the entrance wall, and the other of the lives of Peter and Paul in the far east bay of the north wall.³⁹ The assumption, in turn, has supported the view that the decoration belonged above all to the tradition of Rome and, in particular, to the tradition of the great narrative cycles that ornamented the Early Christian basilicas of the city.⁴⁰ My intention in the following discussion is simply to call this

³⁴Raffaele Garrucci, *Storia della arte cristiana*, III (Prato, 1876), 85 note 1; Guglielmo Matthiae, *Pittura romana del medioevo*, I (Rome, 1965), 223. See also Osborne, 51 ff.

³⁵For the Tempietto see *I dipinti murali e l'edicola marmorea del Tempietto sul Clitunno*, ed. Giordana Benazzi (Todi, 1985), 58 ff, pl. 1. For S. Saba see Josef Wilpert, "Le pitture dell'oratorio di S. Silvia," *Mélanges* 26 (1906), 15 ff, and the discussion of Osborne, 52 f. For S. Urbano see Nussbaum, 277. For S. Pietro in Tuscania see S. Campanari, *Delle antiche chiese di S. Pietro e di S. Maria Maggiore della città di Toscanella* (Montefiascone, 1856), 36 (in reference to the niche): "Là dunque avranno collocato reliquie di santi, gli olii benedetti ed altri divozioni e sante cose si fatte"; Joselita Raspi Serra, *Tuscania* (Venice, n.d.), fig. 65, and fig. 127 for S. Maria Maggiore. In the two churches of Tuscania the niches have a similar square form, and both are similarly situated in the space of a walled up window. To judge from the style of the carved frame, however—at least in the case of S. Pietro—the niche also could not have been much later in date than the main body of the church.

³⁶But see also the discussion of S. Saba: Cecchelli, 146; Osborne, 52 f.

³⁷See Nussbaum, 269 ff, for a discussion of the related monuments.

³⁸Per Jonas Nordhagen, "The Mosaics of John VII (705–707 A.D.). The Mosaic Fragments and Their Technique," *Acta-IRNorv* 2 (1965), 121 ff, and the review by Beat Brenk in *BZ* 64 (1971), 392 ff. See also the remarks of Nordhagen on the variations among Grimaldi's drawings of Old St. Peter's in "The Integration of the Nativity and the Annunciation to the Shepherds in Byzantine Art," *Acts of the Twelfth International Congress of the History of Art, Budapest, 1969* (Budapest, 1972), 253 ff. The conclusions of the present study are based on an examination of three manuscripts: Vat. barb. lat. 2733 (in facsimile, ed. Reto Niggli, Vatican City, 1972), Ms. Florence B.N. II–III 173 (*Opusculum de Sacrosancto Veronice Sudario Salvatoris Nostri Jesu Christi, et Lancea*, Rome, 1620), and Vat. lat. 8404 (a version of the same or very similar treatise—however, paginated differently—dated 1628).

³⁹Grimaldi, Vat. barb. lat. 2733, 88v ff; Stefan Waetzoldt, *Die Kopien des 17. Jahrhunderts nach Mosaiken und Wandmalereien in Rom* (Vienna-Munich, 1964), 68 f.

⁴⁰See Adolf Weis, "Ein Petruszyklus des 7. Jahrhunderts im Querschiff der vatikanischen Basilika," *RQ* 59 (1963), 242, and esp. 244 ff where links to later medieval cycles of Peter are cited.

assumption and the assessment of the decoration that it implies into question. It would be useful to begin with a brief account of the oratory based on Grimaldi's drawings and attendant descriptions.

On the far north end of the entrance wall of the church, there was originally a sequence of over a dozen scenes of the life of Christ arranged around an image of the Virgin with a figure of the donor-pope (Fig. 6).⁴¹ The whole, executed in mosaic, thus formed a large rectangular panel positioned on the upper reaches of the wall above the level of the nave colonnade. This panel, moreover—or at least its center portion with the Virgin and pope—may even have been recessed slightly for it was flanked by columns which Nordhagen deduced must also have functioned as candlesticks.⁴² Below the mosaics stood a ciborium of marble—an arch borne aloft by spiral columns—that enclosed an apse or a lunette with a representation of the Virgin and Child seated beside Sts. Peter and Paul, and an altar.⁴³ The ciborium, in turn, was flanked by two piers richly decorated with rinceaux, bearing urns, and stood directly in front of what has been assumed to be the tomb of the pope, located under a porphyry oval in the pavement of the floor.

On the side wall (the north wall of the church), there were also narrative scenes in panels, but here of the lives of Peter and Paul (Fig. 7).⁴⁴ These scenes too were grouped together in a large rectangle, which was located in the upper reaches of the wall. Below was a socle divided into rectangular panels and uprights decorated with rinceaux. The rectangle of scenes did not fill the bay that it occupied, but left a stretch of wall empty to the window. Nonetheless, the socle decoration continued up to the window and beyond.

⁴¹Grimaldi, Vat. barb. lat. 2733, 89v; Vat. lat. 8404, 32r–32v, for a list of scenes.

⁴²Nordhagen, "Integration of the Nativity," 256 f.

⁴³The area underneath the arch was eventually changed with the opening of the "Porta Santa," generally ascribed to Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503). According to Tiberius Alpharatus, however, there had actually been two holy doors in this area of the church, a smaller one to the left of the oratory (no. 113 on his plan), which was then superseded by another, larger one—presumably the one created by Alexander VI—that opened into the oratory itself (no. 124); see Tiberius Alpharatus, 11, 105 ff, 115; Grimaldi, Vat. barb. lat. 2733, 73r, 74r, 95r, I. Carlo Cecchelli, "Origini della Porta Santa," *Capitolium* 25 (1950), 229 ff; Eva-Maria Jung-Iglessis, "La porta santa," *Studi romani* 23 (1975), 473 ff; Marc Dyckmans, "La Porta d'Oro e le sue origini," in *Roma 1300–1875. L'arte degli anni santi*, ed. Marcello Fagiolo and Maria Luisa Madonna (Milan, 1984), 66 ff.

⁴⁴Grimaldi, Vat. barb. lat. 2733, 88v; Vat. lat. 8404, 32r, with a list of the scenes.

In addressing the issue of the relationship between the two walls our frame of reference will perforce be mainly stylistic, although the evidence that we have at our disposal obviously imposes certain limitations. It is often not possible to be absolutely certain, for instance, that a given detail was not the result of later restoration, or a later addition (the apse or lunette of the Virgin and Child on the entrance wall of the church, for instance, does not survive in Grimaldi's drawings—it is mentioned only in his description).⁴⁵ Nor can we probe the validity of many of Grimaldi's assumptions: reference to the pope's tomb under the porphyry oval in the center of the floor ascribed by Grimaldi to John VII is lacking in the most accurate tradition of the *Liber Pontificalis*, according to Duchesne (although whether the tomb would have been made long after the pope's death or moved here before Grimaldi's time is doubtful).⁴⁶ Nonetheless, much of what Grimaldi records must have been original—the spiral columns and arch, for instance, must have been in place in the early eighth century since they bear an inscription that could have come only from the hand of John VII: "Domus Sanctae Dei Genitricis Mariae." And thus Grimaldi's drawings are very likely to convey something of the original style of both walls, if only in their main lines, which differ clearly in the following respects:

(1) Figures. Most impressive in the scenes on the side wall are the saints themselves, particularly in the upper register, because of their much greater size vis-à-vis the other figures and their pronounced sway.⁴⁷ There is nothing similar in the scenes of Christ's life where, with the exception of the Virgin Orans, the size of figures is more or less related to their presumed placement in space.

(2) Scenes. In the saints' lives, figures and action tend to be arranged mainly in a shallow foreground plane, with architectural elements, pri-

⁴⁵Ibid., 33r.

⁴⁶Vat. barb. lat. 2733, 115v; *Liber Pontificalis*, I, 386.

⁴⁷Weis has commented that the sole preserved fragment from the apostolic cycle—of the figure of Peter—demonstrates that Grimaldi's drawings could not be correct, at least with regard to the great size of Peter and Paul in the upper register of scenes; Weis, 256 and note 90. As Nordhagen has pointed out, however, this fragment belongs to the figure of Peter preaching to the Romans in the second register (not the first, as Weis assumed), and is entirely restored; Nordhagen, "Mosaics of John VII," 141 f, pl. xvib. To judge from the size of the fragment (57 cm high × 68 cm wide), the original figure could have been as tall as 150 cm or more. In any case, the question of size is a relative one, and the unfortunate fact is that none of the other figures in any of the apostolic scenes has survived.

marily large towers, serving as framing devices. In Christ's life, on the other hand, figures are generally arrayed in a landscape with breadth and depth, and without any firm borders, except for the exterior frames of the panels, in between the scenes.

(3) Borders. On the side wall the registers of panels are separated by wide borders, the upper one of which contains an inscription (perhaps also once the lower one too), whereas in the christological scenes the borders are narrower and lack inscriptions.

(4) Location on the wall. The juncture between the two walls, to be sure, is not entirely clear in any of Grimaldi's drawings. Yet it appears that the scenes of the saints do not adjoin those of Christ, and that the two were not even placed precisely on the same level. Furthermore, the scenes of the saints are situated oddly on the side wall, neither centered within the bay they occupy nor reaching all the way to the corner with the entrance wall.

(5) Lower wall structure. In its lower structure the side wall is completely different from the entrance wall: instead of a symmetrical arrangement of columns and pilasters, a series of panels and uprights articulates the wall, but these continue far beyond the scenes.

All of these differences, then, bear upon the question of the relationship between the two walls. They are hardly what one would expect from contemporary works; nor are they likely to have been the result of later restoration, for restoration alone would not explain all of the odd disjunctions in placement, framing, etc. On the contrary, the differences suggest that what Grimaldi and others believed to have been the unitary project of John VII was actually composed of two separate parts—the entrance wall on the one hand and north wall of the nave on the other. These parts, moreover, must have been erected at different times. Clearly the entrance wall belonged to John VII, while the side wall was probably later, though precisely when and indeed why it was added we cannot say with certainty. Perhaps one clue lies in the pronounced sway of the figures of the saints, which is so prominent a feature of the apostolic scenes, and so suggestive of the Gothic style, during which era a decisive change in the area of the oratory of John VII occurred. This was the addition of the ciborium of the Sudarium, built, according to Cerrati (following De Rossi), by Pope Celestine III (1191–98) to house Veronica's Veil, a relic that had long been associated with this area of the church (and indeed

with the oratory of John VII itself).⁴⁸ As a free-standing structure occupying a large part of the northeast corner of the north aisle of the basilica (it is known in drawings by Grimaldi), the ciborium may have given rise to a need to balance the very spotty and unbalanced decoration of this area as a whole. Possibly the scenes of the apostles were added at this time as a kind of pendant on the side to the scenes of Christ on the entrance wall, though why these precise subjects were chosen is an open question.

The important point for us, however, is that the oratory of John VII originally consisted of the decoration of only one wall, the entrance wall of the basilica. Nor is there any indication that the oratory extended beyond these bounds; on the contrary, everything implies that it was confined to this area and that it constituted a self-contained and self-sufficient entity. Hence the symmetry and balance by which all of the major elements on the entrance wall were arranged—the image of the Virgin Orans and the pope, the panels containing the scenes of Christ's life, the ciborium and its flanking pilasters, and the image of the Virgin and Child in the apse or lunette. Even John's tomb—if such it be—situated under the porphyry oval in the floor and on axis with the altar in the center of the wall, fits into this order of the whole (which supports the belief that it too was part of the original plan).

As a structure and a decoration originally occupying only one wall of the basilica, the oratory can perhaps be seen now a little more clearly within its own proper tradition. This tradition, it seems to me, was not, or at least not solely, one of Rome itself—the tradition that produced the great basilicas of St. Peter's and St. Paul's with their narrative cycles of Christ, Peter, and Paul, to which the decoration of the oratory may once have been thought to allude. Rather it was also a Byzantine one—the tradition that would come to produce, centuries later, a form of panel painting known as the "vita icon" (Fig. 8).⁴⁹ For, like the vita icon, the large

⁴⁸ For Cerrati's comments see Tiberius Alpharatus, 107 note 1. See also Cecchelli, "Origini," 236 f. The ciborium was the subject of a treatise by Grimaldi; see above, note 38. On the cult of Veronica's Veil see E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder* (Leipzig, 1899), 218 ff; Hans Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1981), 200 ff. Another major change in the area took place with the opening of the "Porta Santa"; see above, note 43.

⁴⁹ Kurt Weitzmann, "Byzantine Miniature and Icon Painting in the Eleventh Century," rpr. from *The Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford, 1966), in *Studies in Classical and Byzantine Manuscript Illumination*, ed. Herbert L. Kessler (Chicago, 1971), 282 ff; Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art* (Turin, 1983), 162 ff.

panel that constituted the main decoration of the oratory on the upper reaches of the wall was divided into a central field with the portrait of a sacred personage, and a surrounding frame of smaller narrative scenes. And although these parts have different subjects here (one is the Virgin, the other, Christ), like the icon the panel too may be said to have expressed the same message in the relationship between them: the surrounding narrative conveys the importance of the sacred personage's life. In this case, it is the Virgin, shown in the center, whose true significance is revealed in the narrative of Christ or the story of the incarnation—John himself has chosen to call her “*Sancta Dei Genetrix Maria*” in the bold inscription of the arch.⁵⁰ It is difficult, however, to go beyond these statements, to specify how a connection between such chronologically disparate phenomena as the panel in the oratory and the vita icon might actually have occurred, and impossible within the limited context here. Yet a Byzantine connection like this for the panel is not surprising in light of Nordhagen's conclusion on purely technical grounds that Byzantine artists executed the mosaics of the oratory.⁵¹ And finally it would explain why the panel was treated like a sacred devotional object and candles of honor were set out in front of it: because it was a monumental icon in a monumental frame.

⁵⁰ Grimaldi, *Vat. barb. lat.* 2733, 90v–91r; Florence, B.N. II–III 173, 99r.

⁵¹ Nordhagen, “Mosaics of John VII,” 145 ff, esp. 165.

One cannot help but be struck by a certain resemblance that has emerged between the works we have considered, which are otherwise so different in every respect. This resemblance embraces not only architectural form, in the use of a ciborium, and location, in the very placement of the chapel on the entrance wall of the church, but also extends to decoration, in the presence of a primary devotional focus (the scene of the Ascension with the oval-shaped stone; the image of the Virgin and the pope), flanked or surrounded by a series of narrative scenes. One wonders to what extent these similarities are due to the circumstances in which the two works were made, to the need to adapt and adjust conventions created for other contexts to the relatively circumscribed space of the side chapel in the church, and to the desire to make a direct and concentrated appeal to the viewer, and to what extent they are representative of their time. To answer these questions, however, it would be necessary to command a much broader view than is possible here. Even though a great number of chapels were built in the early Middle Ages within the churches of Rome, few have survived; fewer still are adequately known, and they have never been systematically assembled or assessed. But if the present study is any indication, there is more to gain from the scrutiny of even the most meager remains than might often be guessed.

The Johns Hopkins University